**Syria All Set to Get into the Arab Fold**

[Manish Rai](https://dailytimes.com.pk/writer/manish-rai/)

April 27, 2023

Recently in the last few months, there have been a lot of diplomatic initiatives taken up by the Gulf states to improve relations with Damascus. Most important of them was Syrian President Bashar al-Assad’s meeting with Saudi Foreign Minister Prince Faisal bin Farhan Al Saud. This meeting is viewed as the most significant step towards ending Syria’s decade-long regional isolation. Also, in a recent visit to Abu Dhabi in March this year, the UAE gave President Assad the full red-carpet welcome, which was a brazen display of defiance against the United States and its European allies who insist on continued isolation of Syria. Oman, another West-friendly Gulf country, also warmly received the Syrian President on his first official trip to the country in more than a decade of civil war. It should be remembered that [Syria](https://dailytimes.com.pk/1086382/gate-money-from-5th-t20i-to-be-donated-to-turkiye-syria-earthquake-victims/) in the past has been an important centre for pan-Arab ideas in modern times and has been considered the heart of Arab-ism. Since the beginning of the Arab nationalist movement in the late 19th and early 20th century, Syria has hoisted the banner of Arab nationalism. But that stature was certainly lost in the last decade or so.

Just after the beginning of the civil war in 2011, Syria got diplomatically isolated in the Arab world but dynamics are changing now in Syria’s favour. It is a hard reality that almost everyone agrees to. That the Syrian government has revealed an extraordinary ability to survive. Despite the blows it has suffered in the initial phases of the conflict it has not collapsed or crumbled and has even succeeded in saving the cohesion of its civilian government systems, military forces, and security apparatus. Arab countries are courting the Syrian government as now they believe that the civil war is almost over and Assad is here to stay. Arab states after a lot of thinking over the current status quo in Syria and regional power dynamics. Have realized that they will have to cope with the presence of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad as he has survived the civil war and controls around 75-80 per cent of Syrian territory. Moreover, Damascus also remains attentive to its changing regional environment and Syrian diplomacy is also eagerly searching for Arab allies.

Since the beginning of the Arab nationalist movement, Syria has hoisted the banner of Arab nationalism.

The recent peace talks were mediated by China between Iranians and Saudis. Has resulted in the re-establishment of diplomatic relations between two regional powerhouses after seven years of blockade. This important geopolitical development is having a domino effect on the whole region. It is proving to be a catalyst for the resolution of other conflicts in the region as well as both Saudis and Iranians are persuading their allies for engaging in the talks rather than fighting. Hence Iranians have also welcomed the Arab initiative for diplomatic re-engagement with Syria one of its major allies. The other important thing that should be taken into account regarding this initiative of the Arab world. Is that this time the Saudis have decided to take the lead in reintegrating Syria into regional politics and gaining a new partner in the levant? Above all, it aims to advance Bashar al-Assad’s fundamental goal of returning to the Arab League which is still being opposed by some countries like Qatar. But if things move in the right direction. It seems to be only a matter of time until he returns as a member of good standing to the Arab League.

For Syria also having cordial relations with Arab states comes with some important benefits. This normalisation process could bring more humanitarian relief and eventually reconstruction to a country devastated by the civil war where over 90 per cent of the population lives under the poverty line. Enormous amounts of funds are required for reconstruction which can neither be provided by Russians nor Iranians. For Assad, the only viable options for getting funds are the wealthy Arab states like Saudi Arabia or UAE.

It seems more or less now that the Arab world is reaching a consensus to take Syria into its fold. But for Syria now to be fully integrated into the Arab world and play a dominant role. It has to redefine its political approach on both fronts i.e. regional and domestic. The Syrian government should hold renewed talks with the Syrian opposition, allow Arab forces to be stationed in Syria to protect returning refugees and stop captagon smuggling in the region. In the longer term, overall good relations with the Arab world may provide Damascus with manoeuvring capabilities among a wider range of actors and therefore reduce his dependence on the Iranians. If this works well Syrians may even demand that Iranian and its proxy forces like- Hezbollah reduce their presence on its soil. Looking ahead, Syria is set to continue its gradual reintegration into the Arab world’s mainstream diplomatic arena. While each member of the Arab League has a unique perspective on the Syrian crisis as well as Assad’s leadership, more Arab governments seek to restore relations with Damascus.

*The writer is a columnist for Middle-East and Af-Pak region; Emailmanishraiva@gmail.com*